
Hubert Cochet, *L'agriculture comparée*

QUAE Éditions (2011), 159 pages

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Cette note de lecture, traduite en juillet 2014, est proposée en complément de ce volume et ne figure pas dans l'édition imprimée.

- 1 The first merit of Hubert Cochet's book, *Comparative Agriculture*, is that it puts the constituent concepts of this original discipline into perspective. The author revisits the concepts of agricultural development, agrarian system, agricultural revolution, and crises, demonstrating how they were developed at the intersection of the life sciences and social sciences. As a result, he also clarifies the dual purpose underlying the approach of comparative agriculture, namely a quest to know and understand the complex realities of agriculture, and a determination to advance and improve agricultural productivity.
- 2 Hubert Cochet explains the value of drawing from a spectrum of disciplines, each with their own theories and sets of knowledge, in order to develop this approach and conceive its own specific tools. This book highlights the ability (and audacity) of a young discipline to forge its own concepts, and to explore and adopt a range of pragmatic exploratory methods: travelling, observing, questioning, listening, noting, drawing, photographing. Above all, observing at great length — and comparing. The

body of knowledge, gathered by means of long hours in the field and detailed observations, is a welcome celebration of the importance of down-to-earth fieldwork in this type of investigation.

- 3 Comparison is at the core of this endeavour. For example, understanding spatial scales (ranging from the plot, farm and local region to the world) and at the same time, digging into the history of the area and grasping its major turning points. From this book, it is easy to see the extent to which these comparisons lead to a comprehension of different farming entities, allowing us to identify common development trajectories and build an understanding of societies in the globalisation era of the twenty-first century. From this perspective, *Comparative Agriculture* represents an unparalleled contribution to the efforts made by the different social sciences to understand the current globalisation process.
- 4 The strength of Hubert Cochet's book also lies in the fact that the author includes the history of how comparative agriculture evolved into a discipline over time. Admittedly over a long time (the Chair of Comparative Agriculture was established at the National Institute of Agronomy by Eugène Risler in 1878), but that history was revived by René Dumont in his concern for the advancement and improvement of productivity in the wake of the Second World War. Following on from Marc Dufumier, Hubert Cochet stresses the following: "It was indeed Dumont who gave the entire dimension to this comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach by emphasising the importance of economic, social, and political conditions in describing and understanding the multiple forms and pathways of agricultural development." The disciples writing this want that today's students know who the teachers' teachers were; not only to acknowledge the intellectual debt borne by every researcher, but also to ensure that students are aware of the importance of context in producing an idea, and of the necessity of time to fully develop a concept.
- 5 It is nowadays expected that many advances in knowledge will come from the integrative sciences, of which comparative agriculture provides a convincing example. This discipline, which is also an art, is an example of applied sciences meant to, ultimately, inform our decision-makers. In considering both temporal and spatial scales, comparative agriculture can contribute to elucidate the processes that underpin a global, fast-changing agricultural world.
- 6 Hubert Cochet offers a truly French account of comparative agriculture, that was developed by a renowned agronomy institute yet remains a relatively isolated discipline. We hope that the book will be promptly translated into English and distributed outside French-speaking countries, so that this important method of assessing the key drivers of agricultural production may be widely shared and discussed.

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